

BLACK CHURCHES AND THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT

Gereja Orang Kulit Hitam dan Civil Rights Movement

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INTISARI

Penelitian ini mencoba untuk mengungkapkan kondisi Kristen Hitam dari perbudakan hingga Gerakan Hak Sipil. Peranan gereja-gereja hitam selama Gerakan Hak Sipil dan sumbangan-sumbangan yang dibuat oleh pemimpin-pemimpin gereja atau para pengikut gereja yang membuat suksesnya Gerakan Hak Sipil juga dicoba untuk mengungkapkannya pada penelitian ini. Pendirian gereja-gereja hitam menjadi gerakan bermakna dalam memperkembangkan kesadaran hitam bahwa diskriminasi yang mereka alami sangat bertentangan dengan ajaran-ajaran Kristen yang di dalamnya Tuhan telah menciptakan semua orang - putih dan hitam sama dalam semua aspeknya. Gereja juga menyediakan pengalaman kepemimpinan bagi figur-figur dan pemimpin-pemimpin yang terkemuka. Oleh karena itu, hal ini tidak mengherankan bahwa kebanyakan pemimpin Gereja Hak Sipil berasal dari gereja.

Kata kunci: *Gereja Hitam, Diskriminasi, Segregasi, dan Gerakan Hak Sipil.*

INTRODUCTION

When the first time Africans were transported to the New World as slaves, they brought with them their different kinds of local religious beliefs and practices. The existence of the African in America had given very significant influence in the life and in the future shape of the American experience as religion and as culture. (Albanese, 1992 : 194)

THE BLACK CONVERSION and THE INVISIBLE INSTITUTION

Most of African slaves who came to America were people from West Africa where a strong sense of community grew flourish. Every individual understood that he was part of his community and that no one could live in isolation. The relationship between one and another was tied up with the kinship and nationhood both in the past and the present.

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(Albanese, 194)

The Africans experienced drastic and sudden change of their fortunes when they were forced to be the human commodities in America. They lost their kinship system which bound them very closely between one and another, the culture that became an integral part of their lives, and the religious expressions which also became ordinary matters of their living. (Wright, 11)

Thriving in difficult situations and under oppressions in an alien culture without the support of friends or kin, the Africans, later they were called Blacks, felt that they had been uprooted from their original land and their Gods. The relationship they had was a subordinate relationship with White Americans, many of whom were Christian. It was not surprising then that gradually the Africans adopted Christian's way of expressing their religious belief to God. (Albanese, 196)

The process of adopting the forms of Christianity took place over a long time, in a very gradual process and even it was unnoticeable. There were a lot of obstacles that made the process of African-American conversion took so long time. Most of them came from the part of slaveholders. At first, the Whites' objections to the conversion of Blacks were based on the feeling that Blacks could not be saved and that the Black equality in the White church organizations was far from being expected.

The problems of racism added with the fear of slave rebellion fostered the reluctance of slaveholders to have their slaves become Christian. It was assumed that most of slave rebellions had a grounding in religion.

Another reluctance came from the part of slaves who questions the appropriateness of Christianity for themselves. The difficult and under oppressions situations experienced by the slaves mostly originated from their White slaveholders who professed to be Christians. Rightly or wrongly this fact was planted and nurtured deeply in the slaves' mind as bad memories.

Frederick Douglas, who spent a good portion of his youth after 1826 as a slave in Baltimore wrote in his famous *Narratives of the Life of Frederick Douglas, An American Slave* (1845),

For of all slaveholders with whom I have ever met, religious slaveholders are the worst. I have ever found them the meanest and basest, the most cruel and cowardly, of all others. It was my unhappy lot not only to belong to a religious slaveholder, but to live in a community of such religionists.

A slave abolition was another inhibiting problem which influenced

the conversion. Most of early evangelicals believed that sense of egalitarianism had to be enforced, therefore they condemned slavery.

Through the years before the Civil War, many slaveholders came to believe that a feasible proper form of Christianity which regulated the separate duties of master and slave and the mutual obligations between them was really needed. It was expected then an orderly society could be created. However, inevitably the slaves' Christianity contradicted that of their masters'. For the slaves knew that no matter how sincerely religious the slave owners might be, their Christianity was compatible with slavery, and the slaves' was not. (Hackett, 80)

Living under pressure in the midst of the White-dominated Christianity of the masters, Blacks established their own form of Christianity called "Invisible Institution". The Invisible Institution was a church or churches which had neither official meeting places nor membership rolls. It was carried out in hiding, in the woods at evening or in the secret cabin of one of the slaves. The religious practices were always in danger of interruption and severe punishment that might lead to the death of a slave.

Christianity among slaves became visible with the spread of churches throughout the southern population. It is difficult to tell how much of an underground black church existed across the slaves states early in nineteenth century America. Slaves, of course, did not confine their thoughts and feelings about religion to church services and they may well have congregated by themselves in order to listen exclusively to their own preachers and sing in their style. (Wright, 83)

The role of the invisible institution was very significant for the slave life. It brought slaves together as people, intense community which improved to become a nation within the nation. Blacks came to understand themselves as one among the many, just like so many others who were pouring into America from abroad during these years.

THE FREEDOM AND THE BLACK CHURCH

Following the civil war, the great majority of Black Christianity joined black-led churches among the Methodist and Baptist. The independence of these churches enabled their pastors to become prominent leaders in the black struggle for integration in the society. (Hackett, 1995:413)

When the Black Church in both the North and the South came into its own after the Civil War, church organization provided a vehicle not only for religious but also for political expression among the Blacks. This religious life of Blacks was strengthened with the fact when the Invisible

Institution became an official and autonomous black church. For a time, it seemed that the churches of the embryonic United States would insist upon complete integration of the Negro into the religious life of the nation and would spearhead the attack against the institution of slavery. (Franklin, 93)

Blacks realized that their Christianity was being subjected to a test. There were a lot of problems and tensions during the age of the multiplication of Black churches and church members. However, despite the difficulties, the Black churches succeeded in multiplying the members and providing for them an institutional place to express their very religious relationships with God. The birth of the black church was a response to racism: blacks were not allowed to sit with whites in worship. As a result, social advocacy and justice have always been an integral part of black church life. ([://www.blackandchristian.com/articles/academy/trussell1.shtml](http://www.blackandchristian.com/articles/academy/trussell1.shtml))

Thousands of Blacks were organized under white Baptists and Methodist denominational bodies. However, whether they remained within white organizations or established independent churches, they fashioned their own African-American religious expressions through the years of the Invisible Institutions.

One of the most important influences in improving the position of Blacks in American life at the mid century was the role of religious institutions and organizations. (Hope, 413). The assumption that the church was a part of the salvation agency was strongly rejected by educated Blacks. They turned their attention to the change in management that would give them influence in the church and in the society.

The development of Black churches was along with a growing sense of nationalistic hopes which led Blacks to search for ways to make their freedom complete.

BLACK CHURCH IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

Entering the twentieth century, the role of black churches was improving. Church was not only used as a media of religious expressions and a place to maintain blacks peculiar needs, but also as a social force of the race. The churches themselves became involved in numerous secular activities in their efforts to provide better services for their members. Since 1920s many of them had begun day-care services for working parents. (Franklin, 1979:422). There were many churches organizations appeared and most of them were interested in improving the status of blacks. In short, black Christians were bearing witness to their humanity which

they believed God created equal to that of whites. (Hackett, 1995:413)

Woodson argued that up to the twentieth century, blacks had established and maintained only one institution of their own. That was their church. As it was emphasized by Yvonne Scruggs-leftwich, Black churches are the most vital and independent institution the African-American community has ever had. ([://www.blackandchristian.com](http://www.blackandchristian.com)). When the time came for them to exercise other functions in society, this one institution had to be overworked to supply the needs of others. (Hope, 221)

Church attempted to answer many social purposes which were impossible to be done prior to the twentieth century. Before, church was a center at which friend looked forward to meeting friend, contacted with whom was denied by the rigorous demands of slavery. Then church became a place of enlightenment through the information disseminating from better informed or by actual teaching in the Sunday School, it served often as an outlet for expression of the Negro social mind, now for a renewed determination to break their chains through prayer, then to resort to concerted action on the basis that he who would be free must himself first strike the blow. (Hope, 265)

Church developed its hold on education as a basis of improving blacks' status in the society. As a result, educated blacks began to reject the church as the agency of salvation and turned their attention more and more to the immediate problems at hand. They did not hesitate to register their impatience with their leaders. They demanded a change in management that would give them more influence in the church, and insisted upon changes in forms of worship that were more in keeping with their improved intellectual. (Franklin, 258)

Church organizations came to involve in numerous activities not only to provide better service of their members but also to provide a vehicle for both religious and political expressions. In short, they provided their members not only with spiritual and material assistance but also support as they encountered a world in which they were learning the ambiguities of legal freedom. (Albanese, 1992:206). From church, blacks started to learn from one another. They were undergoing training which resulted in valuable discipline. They developed the power to think and to think on their feet, to express that thought so eloquently as to make a lasting impression. The church, then had been a training school for the black orators who had impressed the world as the inspired spokesmen of a persecuted people. (Woodson, 272)

In the late twentieth century, in which the same fundamental decision to join America had been made, almost half of black Americans

belonged to church. The number of the church membership was getting higher proportionately. With perhaps 20 million Protestant church members among their numbers, African American church could count over half of their population as belonging to a church. (Albanese, 215). Hence, during the civil rights movements of the sixties, it was the more traditional black churches that provided leadership and marshaled their laity to a statement of the religion of blackness. (Albanese, 214)

THE INVOLVEMENT OF BLACK CHURCHES IN CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT

Rightly or wrongly the optimism of Blacks in achieving full citizenship rights had been supported by Christian principles which revealed that God loves His children, and that every man, from a bass black to a treble white, is significant on God's keyboard. (Washington, 18)

Black churches grew as a stronghold of black struggle. It provided a vehicle for religious and even political expressions among blacks. It became an independent city in which they governed themselves and planned their interactions with other people. (Albanese, 205). Blacks turned more and more to the churches for self-expression, recognition and leadership. As it is mentioned by Franklin (377), perhaps the most powerful institution in Black's world was the church. Nothing in their world was so completely their own as their church.

The steady progress of black church developments did strengthen the role of black churches in the American society during 1960s. Not only was the quality of black people surely improved but also the awareness of their right position in the society. Older, middle-class leaders supplied the base for movement activities in their communities, feeding and housing civil rights workers and offering them a degree of protection. After early misgivings, key black churches opened their doors to the movement, providing both a forum for discussion and equally as important, the spiritual sanction of the black community's most influential institution. (Eagle, 73)

Sixteen Street Baptist Church, for example, because of segregation, functioned as a meeting place, social center and lecture hall for a variety of activities important to the lives of the city's black citizens. Due to the church's prominence in the black community, and also of its location in Downtown Birmingham, the church served as headquarters for civil rights mass meetings and rallies in the early 1960s. During this time of trial and confrontation, the church provided strength and safety for black men, women, and children dedicated to breaking the bonds of segregation in

Birmingham, a city many black Americans at that time believed to be the most racist in America. The mass meetings held in Sixteen Street Baptist Church and in many other churches in Birmingham resulted in marches and demonstrations that were unforgettable for American people. (wfn-news@wfn.org)

Church organizations did give the blacks experience of leadership and cooperation that was to mean much in a later day. They started to seek for integration into the political, social and economic life of the nation. (Franklin, 95). Perhaps the most important place to start an effort to understand the civil rights movement is to recognize that its strength was rooted in the collective solidarity and vitality of black institutions or black churches. (Eagle, 129-30)

The emergence of church-based organizations, each came into existence for the sole purpose of achieving full citizenship rights for African-Americans in every aspect of American society, was a realization of the political drive of black leaders. Although the separation of houses of worship was much inconsistent with the Christians teachings, the miserable moment experienced by blacks caused by the separation gave them an unusual opportunity to develop leadership. It was no surprise, therefore, that Albanese mentioned that in the twentieth century the leadership for the black civil rights movements came largely from the church. (205)

Martin Luther King Jr. was one of the prominent leaders. He was young, vigorous, educated and also courageous and effective speaker. Above all, King was a minister that seemed to be the most logical choice of becoming a boycott leader. (Washington, X)

As a minister, King encouraged the black people through his preach that from Christianity's affirmation death is not the end. Death is not a period that ends the great sentence of life, but a comma that punctuates it to more lofty significance. Death is not a blind alley that leads the human race into a state of nothingness, but an open door which leads man into life eternal. (117)

Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) founded by Martin Luther King Jr. was one of the example of regional network of black ministers who had the same aim in gaining equal opportunity for blacks. SCLC attempted to provide ideological and tactical guidance for student protesters and based the activities on the spirit of love. (Eagle, 25)

Later, one of the prominent executive director of SCLC, Ella Baker, initiated the formation of Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) to organize the continuing sit-in effort to protest segregation in

lunch counters.

Churches started to open the doors to accommodate the civil rights workers' activities. The National Council Churches was very enthusiastic about the project of Freedom Summer that it gave financial supports for the volunteers. The black struggle for freedom in Mississippi of the early movement was forged on the battle fields of World War II and grounded in indigenous institutions in the black community such as church, the handful of private black colleges and the family. (67)

Black churches were also places to gather demonstrators before they started their activities. For example, Holt Street Baptist was used to hold a mass meeting of blacks in the city for the purpose of determining the future course of the boycott. Over 1,000 black children marched out of the sixteen street Baptist church for Birmingham march in 1963. Many younger council of Federated Organizations (COFO) activists went into the movement committed to this liberal philosophy. Coming out of the church they were dedicated to the ideals of nonviolence (Eagle, 75)

Improving black people's economic condition was also the focus of black church's leaders. By the issuing of Black Manifesto in 1969 they demanded 500 dollars or about fifteen dollar per black person in the "reparations" to the black people in the United States. Black Manifesto spokesman, James Forman, in his address to the White Christian Churches and the Synagogues in the United States of America and to All other Racist Institution said, "We know that the Christian churches have contributed to our oppression in White America. We do not intend to abuse our black brothers and sisters in black churches who have uncritically accepted Christianity. We want them to understand how the racist white Christian church with its hypocritical declarations and doctrines of brotherhood has abused our trust and faith. An attack on the religious beliefs of black people is not our major objective, even though we know that we were not Christians when we were brought to this country, but that Christianity was used to help enslave us." (Gaustad, 499)

CONCLUSION

The existence of Black Churches in America was very significant to the life of Black Americans. It was believed that church as the embryo of black organizations was considered as the most prominent and powerful institution blacks ever had.

Along with the increasing number of black churches, the changing role of the black churches slowly took place. Church was able to accommodate both material and spiritual needs of blacks. The churches also started

to get involved in various kinds of activities.

Approaching to the twentieth century, blacks came to believe that the segregation they got from whites was not only sociologically, politically and economically unsound, but it was also morally wrong and sinful. The role of churches then moved from a place for expressing religious relationships between people and God into an institution which functioned as a stronghold of black struggle. Segregation which took place in almost every aspect of blacks' lives, made blacks turn more and more to church as a media of self-expressions, recognition and even as media to practice leadership.

Various kinds of black organizations appeared in which most of the prominent leaders came from church. Although they had different tactics and strategies, they came with the goals which were basically the same. They pursued the integration of blacks into the mainstream of American society so that color will no longer be a determining factor for success or failure in many human endeavor. (Hackett, 414) Christianity spirit and the teachings of God were always injected to encourage blacks. They believed that God created them equal to whites and that they had to seek integration into political, social and economic life of the nation.

The experience of leadership and cooperation given by the black churches did mean a lot in Black's struggle. It enabled them to forge ahead. The black churches' roles in initiating and sustaining the organization of civil workers were apparent. It can be seen from the church's availability and openness toward civil rights movement activities. The enthusiasm of the black churches could also be seen from the churches' eagerness to collect financial support for the success of civil rights movement.

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